



Small Businesses and Content Marketing: Best Practices

Content marketing is a big deal these days. Companies as large and as [well-known as Coca-Cola](#) are using content marketing to remain top-of-mind with consumers. Content marketing is unlike more traditional forms of advertising because it's accessible to anyone with any size budget, which is good news for small—even solo—businesses. Small businesses can leverage the power of content to get noticed, gain connections and customers, and build business through the strategic use of content.

Strategic is the key word here. Effective content marketing isn't just about creating lots of content and hoping something resonates with your audience.

What Is Content Marketing?

Content marketing is as it sounds: using content as a means to market products and services. In truth, it isn't a new concept. Companies have been doing this for years. John Deere is often pointed to as one of the early adopters of content marketing. The company's publication [The Furrow](#) was launched in 1895 and is still going strong.

They're certainly not alone. Jell-O is another brand that has successfully used content—in this case, recipes—to promote and sell its products. Jell-O introduced its recipe book in 1904. Today, [those recipes are readily found online](#) and are still engaging consumers and prompting sales of Jell-O products.

Although content marketing is nothing new, the concept is exploding these days.

“Content marketing is slowly but surely taking over the way companies market and sell,” says Kinga Skowronek, brand and buzz coordinator for [UrbanBound](#), a relocation firm based in Chicago. “People are no longer interested in either having their days disrupted by cold callers or being contacted by someone who bought their email address off a list,” says Skowronek.

“People want to be educated, and the only way to do this is through content marketing. Content marketing allows you to slowly warm yourself up to a prospect, and then when they are ready to take action, they will come to you. This makes the sales process much warmer and allows conversation to flow freely. If people feel like you have more to offer them than just a product—that you are willing to educate them and offer value—they will be much more inclined to work with you.”

Unfortunately, small businesses aren't adopting content marketing to the extent that they should be, says Elliot Simmonds, lead consultant with [Rippleout Marketing](#) in the United Kingdom. In fact, [a study done by the Content Marketing Institute](#) found that only 35 percent of small businesses have a documented content marketing strategy.

So, why aren't all marketers documenting a content marketing strategy?

“The reality is that content marketing takes one thing small businesses don't seem to have enough of: time,” says Rebecca Lombardo, director of marketing and business development with [The Sutter Group](#) in Landham, Maryland. “They are reluctant to dive into the deep end because it can take almost a year for their ‘long tail’ blog posts to show any evidence of ‘working,’” says Lombardo. “Most companies don't blog enough or long enough for the results to show.” But when they do, she says, the results are clear.

Does It Work?

Content marketing is growing in popularity, precisely because it does work! Examples abound across many types and sizes of businesses. In fact, *every* business has something of value to convey to its customers and prospects.

One Month is a good example of this. [One Month](#) is a small, Manhattan-based company that offers online, self-paced courses on coding, programming and business topics. “We make free videos, articles and host live webinars,” says Sarah Kathleen Peck, director of communications.

“We find that the free content we put out there helps us develop deeper relationships with our students, shows our skill and work, and helps drive traffic and sales to our paid programs.” That’s a key point. One of the hesitancies that businesses often have about using content marketing is the fear of “giving too much away.” It may be counter-intuitive, but those who are using content marketing effectively—like One Month—have found the reality to be just the opposite.

“Content marketing is an essential part of marketing efforts, no matter your business size,” says Peck. “When you put information out there that tells the story of your business and lets people get a sense of your value and usefulness, you can attract new customers to your product or business.”

There are other misconceptions about content marketing says Stephanie Padovani of [Book More Brides](#), a firm that works with wedding professionals (e.g. photographers, DJs, planners, florists) to help them better market their services.

“Most of the businesses we work with are making \$25,000 - \$50,000 per year,” says Padovani. “While they may have heard the phrase ‘content marketing,’ they don’t really know what it means. They know they’re ‘supposed’ to be blogging and doing social media. That’s about it.” Padovani lists four common misconceptions about content marketing:

- Blog posts have to be long and take lots of research to be valuable.
- I have to write all my own content.
- I have to create content that’s *only* about my specific business...and that’s really boring.
- It takes a long time to create content.

“We’re seeing that once our clients grasp this concept and adopt a system for creating content that works for them, usually in as little as 3-4 hours per week, they’re surprised at how simple it can be, and they start seeing results within a few weeks,” says Padovani.

When it comes to the effectiveness of content marketing, “the benefits for thought leadership, and also SEO, are great,” says Simmonds. This may be due to the necessary lag time between creating/distributing content and seeing real results, he notes. It’s not like AdWords, he says, where marketers can see clicks coming through in a matter of hours.

Jason Abrahams, VP of marketing with [Root3 Growth Marketing](#) in the Chicago area, agrees. “Measuring content success requires patience, and many small businesses struggle to analyze their marketing ROI in general, let alone from content marketing,” says Abrahams. Those small businesses, he says, would benefit from focusing their ROI analysis on consumption, lead generation, and sales.

“At the end of the day, if their content is generating more traffic, leads and, ultimately, revenue, does anything else really matter? Content is your business's voice; it is important to give it the dedication it deserves.”

Best Practices

One of the big benefits of content marketing in the digital age is its ability to increase website traffic—and that’s what it’s all about for most small businesses.

“Content marketing for our [911 Restoration](#) company falls into the category of backlink generation,” says Al Ruggie, public relations director with 911 Restoration. “This is, essentially, getting companies and news publications to print stories with our company name hyperlinked in the text at the same time as giving your readers information about something along the lines of ‘What To Do For A Pipe Burst In The Home’ or ‘10 Tips For You and Your Home To Survive A Blizzard.’”

Not only are readers personally interested in the information, but the fact that the company has been referenced—and is usually linked to within the story—is a big deal as well. “Readers notice a blue link there for our restoration company as the quotable authority and our website also gets traffic generation and rank authority,” says Ruggie.

While the prospect of using content to generate leads and to convert customers may seem like it will require a lot of effort, and it can, Simmonds stresses the importance of repurposing content.

“That blog post could be tweeted out again and again, and (can) create engagement for months to come; the webpage will be found in (search engine results pages) for as long as it is online, so even years on, it’s still bringing in traffic and leads.” And, he adds, “If you can get a few blog posts on a topic, you can link them all together into an e-book and publish it; if you get people to provide an email to download it, you have a set of qualified leads.”

Blogging is another best practice, says Skowronek. “It is absolutely crucial for a small business to keep an active blog because it creates an educational component to your company. Keeping a blog not only helps to expand personal knowledge about your industry, but it proves that you are not just trying to sell your product—you actually care about providing meaningful and useful content. This not only makes your audience trust you more, but it holds you as a business more accountable to staying up to date with trends and best practices, keeping you and your readers at the top of your game.”

To succeed in this increasingly competitive space, says Emily Culclasure, digital media analyst with [seoWorks](#), which has offices in Australia, San Francisco, New York and Paris, “Small businesses have to be leaders in their industries and craft a brand voice that will stand out among competitors.”

This means a few things:

- Regularly updating company blogs with unique opinions on hot topics
- Sharing advice and tips related to the industry
- Email campaigns
- An active profile on appropriate social media networks to share tips, knowledge and latest content

There is ample opportunity for small businesses to see results through content marketing. But, says Culclasure, “Smaller businesses have to rely on well-crafted content marketing to gain recognition.”

Additional Comments:

“I agree that content marketing is a great strategy for small businesses because it allows the business to tell their story, improves their SEO ranking, and also provides great content to share on social media. When small businesses adopt content marketing strategies, then take the content and share it via a variety of avenues, it allows them to maximize their efforts. I am a believer in developing content that is thought provoking and tells a story so the content can be re-used. This approach allows small businesses to be more efficient and get their brand out without exhausting their small internal team.”

– Kathryn Bisson, [Technology Seed](#)

“I have found that when blogging, the posts that are interactive with the audience get the most traction. When I write a blog that speaks to the reader, such as question/answer posts, posts with images including ‘click to tweet’ links at the end of each blurb, or anything else that breaks up paragraphs, the hits I get on that blog nearly double. The audience wants to feel like they are engaging with you, not just reading a block of straight copy which probably won't resonate with them for long. (P.S. This also creates great content/images to post on social media!)”

– Kinga Skowronek, Brand and Buzz Coordinator, [UrbanBound](#)

“I’ve been involved in the SEO and digital industry for a decade, having put a considerable focus on high quality, unique content. Over the years, I’ve found most small businesses are actually producing content that’s unique and engaging—they just need a little coaching to turn it into content that’s going to be of genuine use. A prime example can be seen with many small business social media accounts. They’re often updated numerous times throughout the day and get a lot of engagement on the platform itself, but simply need to amend their approach slightly to drive traffic to their website.”

– Dan Smith, SEO Specialist, [Leighton Ltd.](#)

“I write articles on my areas of expertise—business communication, leadership and marketing. I post the articles on [my blog](#). I have created several videos and a couple of video series most of which are posted on YouTube. I use Hootsuite to repurpose my articles by tweeting individual bullets from my articles along with a link to the referenced article, driving people back to the blog where a popup feature offers new visitors a free gift that puts them on my email list so I can communicate with them, build a relationship with them, and ultimately sell them something.”

– Loretta Love Huff, [Emerald Harvest Consulting](#)

“Content marketing is an extremely easy and cost-effective strategy that can be implemented by virtually any business. Implementing a blog that provides a steady flow of useful articles and information for your business’ target audience is extremely useful for increasing visibility and fostering your business’ reputation and expertise in a certain area or niche. In addition, this kind of content marketing helps SEO efforts and your blog/website’s organic ranking.

“When we first started our content marketing efforts with our blog, we had a very small budget and mainly focused on quality, text-based content. However, as we grew in size and budget, we scaled our blog and added other content marketing strategies, adapting to add graphics, photos and complementary video content on YouTube. Content marketing is a very valuable marketing and SEO strategy for any small business because it is cost-effective and scalable as your budget grows with the business.”

– Julie K, Director of Sales & Marketing, [TorontoVaporizer.ca](#)

“As an inbound marketing agency in the Greater Vancouver Area of British Columbia, we have seen a major transition in the way online consumers collect information and make purchasing decisions. Adopting a content marketing strategy with your target audience in mind helps set you as a standard go-to source for trusted and valuable information. This caters to the inbound marketing methodology of not interrupting your consumer, like with traditional marketing and advertising practices. Attracting your audiences in with valuable information that addresses their concerns or answers questions related to them drives a more valuable experience for the end consumer. It is for this reason (that) having an active publishing schedule for your business is more important than ever before.”

– Todd Mumford, CEO, [Riverbed Marketing](#)

We hope you’ve enjoyed these expert insights from content marketers in a variety of industries. Let’s keep the conversation going! How are you using content marketing as part of your marketing communication mix?

[Let us know.](#)